

## The Archives of Antisemitism in Scandinavia: Knowledge production and stereotyping in a long-term historical perspective

### Purpose and aims

Is modern antisemitism the same as, or similar to, its medieval forebears? Or is it essentially different? There are two opposed theories regarding the nature and emergence of anti-Jewish hatred. Antisemitism has been called ‘the longest hatred’, an enduring, universal, essentially unchanging hatred continuing from the Middle Ages to the present day. At the same time, scholars claim a fundamental difference between medieval, religiously motivated anti-Judaism, and modern, racist antisemitism. Both schemes of interpretation – a strict divide between medieval religious anti-Judaism and modern racist antisemitism on the one hand, and a one-to-one analogy of medieval and modern outcomes of certain stereotypes on the other – seem overly simplified and might partly derive from the difficulty in applying modern and postmodern theories of racism and antisemitism to medieval source material. In Scandinavia, with its relatively poor sources for the pre-Reformation era, it seems particularly difficult to establish (or disprove) continuities. Nonetheless, modern eruptions of antisemitism draw from an archive of beliefs, fantasies, and prejudices about Jews, a mental store of collective knowledge filled with fragments from previous historical periods. The fact that there was no resident Jewish population in Scandinavia before the seventeenth century certainly affected, but by no means prevented, the emergence and tradition of knowledge about “Jews” – consequently, most modern theories of antisemitism see the phenomenon as entirely disconnected from the conduct, potential misbehaviour or even existence of Jews as living people.

These two aspects, the question of continuities or discontinuities, and the significance of historically grown knowledge about “Jews” as the Other, inform the central questions of the proposed project. Does the existence of hatred towards Jews in areas with no Jewish population in the Middle Ages and today have the same causes as in those areas with “real” Jews? Can the rise and popularity of antisemitism from the nineteenth century onwards be explained solely within a contemporary framework? Can theories and analytical models of modern racial prejudice be applied to the Middle Ages and vice versa?

This project will investigate antisemitism in Scandinavia (focusing on Sweden, Denmark and Norway) as a phenomenon of *longue durée*, without suggesting a straightforward continuity between pre-modern and modern forms of Jew-hatred. The central theoretical concept is the archive, in memory studies used as a metaphor for passively stored historical traces, which have lost their immediate communicative context and thus are available for re-framing and re-interpretation. Within four thematic case studies, the historical roots of modern antisemitism in Scandinavia will be analysed: chosenness, murder, usury, and bodies. Without aiming to write yet another history of German antisemitism, the German lands will serve as an area of comparison for the Scandinavian evidence because of their massive cultural influence on the lands to the north and the different situations regarding a resident Jewish population. The focus will be on the question of adaptation of cultural knowledge in specific geographic and historical circumstances, combining the approaches of microhistory and the *longue durée*. Instead of simply adding further arguments in support of one of the two potential theories regarding the nature and emergence of modern antisemitism, this volume seeks to provide answers on a smaller scale, regarding specific areas, phenomena, and topics, and thus to offer a differentiation of the existing schemes of interpretation rather than their reinforcement.

What role does religious anti-Judaism play for racist antisemitism in a particular historical context and case? Common research questions for the case studies are thus:

- Which archive of historical knowledge exists regarding a specific stereotype or anti-Jewish resentment?
- Which areas of knowledge does this archive stem from – religion, literature, images, or other?

- Is there a distinct continuity visible between pre-modern and modern forms of antisemitism?

Main objective: the “archive”

The central idea of this project is the existence of antisemitic ideas and stereotypes as latent components of collective knowledge, existing permanently but leading to specific outbreaks in specific historical circumstances. The interconnection between this latent knowledge and the specific outbreaks will be analysed from the historical perspective of continuity or discontinuity. The latent knowledge is, in accordance with recent concepts of memory studies, called “archive”, as a more or less systematic collection of different kinds of sources, collected in different historical phases and stored in a common room of collective ideas and ideologemes. In the cases of specific outbreaks, people draw from this stack of archival knowledge, update the information contained there and transform or adapt it to their particular needs. The concept of “archive” provides a specific image for collective memory, knowledge and the subconscious: a room full of files ordered according to their provenience rather than their topic and content, covering long historical periods, and structuring historical knowledge according to strict and unchangeable principles and rules developed for all archives. The image of the archival storage room also allows for the idea of gaps in collective knowledge, caused by earlier losses of archival holdings through external factors such as fires or wars, or by the structure of the holdings themselves, which necessarily omit certain large areas of source production and still are considered as the most complete foundations of historical knowledge we have access to. In Foucault’s terminology, “archive is the law that determines what can be said”. Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and, inspired by these, Aleida Assmann have shifted the notion of archive from a place where knowledge is stored to one where it is produced. As long as the content of the archive is not canonized as an integral part of cultural knowledge and memory and as such constantly remembered and staged, it becomes a passive knowledge, half-way between remembering and forgetting.

Applied to the “archive” of antisemitism, this means that the historical knowledge we draw from in the moments of outbreaks of antisemitism is structured specifically and mirrors its own evolution. Understanding the principles and structure of the archive means understanding the structure of the contemporary evidence of outbreaks of antisemitism, and it radically challenges the perception that antisemitism is nothing but an “import article” in Scandinavia. Instead, the concept of archive allows the analysis of various national and international sources of knowledge and information about “Jews”, which do not necessarily rely on actual Jews. It also allows for the integration of religious or mythical as well as secular fragments of knowledge which inform modern antisemitism.

The case studies

Chosenness

Chosenness is one of the central controversies between Jewish and Christian theologies. It is grounded in the Church Fathers’ idea of supersessionism, the idea that the covenant between God and Christians as founded with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ superseded the old covenant between God and the Jewish people. Christians thereby replace Jews as the chosen people, and the Jewish religion is ultimately outdated and superfluous. Utterly relevant in pre-modern periods, this idea is still prevalent in contemporary theological debates, even though mostly rejected by theologians interested in Jewish-Christian dialogue. A recent example of a resurgence of neo-Marcionite ideas about the role of the Old Testament is the controversy around the Berlin based exegete Notger Slenczka and his text “Die Kirche und das Alte Testament”, which doubts the relevance of the Old Testament as a holy book for Christians and has been heavily criticized by both fellow professors of theology, students and organizations of interreligious dialogue. For Sweden, the invitation of Palestinian Evangelical Lutheran Mitri Raheb, who wrote that the failure of the Jews is due to the inferiority of Old Testament

law, by the Swedish Church to Uppsala might serve as an example, as well as the prevalence of supersessionist arguments in school books about Judaism. But probably even more relevant than the theological debates rooted in supersessionism is the secularization of the idea that the Jews consider themselves as the chosen people. In this context, chosenness does not reflect the idea that Jews have been selected by God to carry the yoke of the commandments and act as a light unto the nations, but rather that they consider themselves as something special, above non-Jews, and select.

## Murder

That Jews killed Jesus Christ has been one of the most fatal and deadly allegations from the Christian side. Originally deriving from early Christian (mis)readings of the Gospel, the concept of deicide Jews flourished during the Middle Ages resulting in a broad and general idea that Jews like to kill people. Historical evidence of the spread of this religiously grounded allegation is the idea of a world conspiracy of Jews with the aim to kill Christians, which became particularly virulent during the outbreaks of the Black Death, when Christians accused Jews of having brought the pandemic into existence because of their murderous nature. Other evidence includes the many cases of blood libel, which although playing only a minor role in contemporary forms of antisemitism, still come to the surface, as for example the staging of the Merchant of Venice in Stockholm in 2004 shows: in the central scene, Shylock dances towards his victim Antonio, who kneels with outspread arms, to the sound of the Pessach song “Echad mi yodea” – a combination of ritual murder allegations, Jewish cruelty, and Christ killing.

More frequently, the old stereotype of murderers of innocents is transformed in a political context: Israelis kill Palestinian children. Which role does the stereotype of Christ killers and murderers play in a political context of war, occupation, and general political instability in the Middle East? Does the religious imagery influence criticism of the politics of the State of Israel? An issue particularly interesting to discuss for Scandinavia here is the concept of Schuldabwehr developed for post-war Germany: feeling guilty for the centuries-long persecutions of Jews and particularly the Holocaust, Germans accuse Jews of various crimes and general evilness, resulting in a conversion of the relation between victim and perpetrator. A rhetoric relation has been analysed as specific for this figure of thought: “why would the Jews, who have suffered so much, now do the same to the Palestinians?” Even though the existence of a Schuldabwehr pattern has commonly been denied for Scandinavia due to the countries’ position during the Second World War (neutrality or occupation), the “why would they do the same thing?”-rhetoric is used abundantly in public debates.

## Usury

A common perception of modern studies of antisemitism is that the interconnection of Jews and money is based on medieval Jewish economic activities and their exclusion from the Christian guilds and professions. Recent studies by medieval scholars such as Michael Toch and Giacomo Todeschini have countered this perception, showing it to be overly simplified: while it is true that Jews were active in money-lending, these activities were not nearly as exclusive as suggested. Jews owned land, were active in all kinds of handicrafts and trades, as merchants, artists and all other kinds of everyday life. Additionally, the Christian campaign against usury was for a long time an internal Christian issue, and the conflation with anti-Jewish resentment is a relatively late projection of this issue onto the Other. Still, the modern obsession of the relation between Jews and money is almost universal and well visible also in Scandinavia, particularly in the inter-war period and its caricatures. Even today, the belief that Jews are more preoccupied with money than other people is the most widespread antisemitic stereotypes in western European democracies. In politically heated times, this interconnection can even lead to riots, such as in Oslo in 2009, when during anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish demonstrations a McDonalds restaurant was vandalized because of a rumour that all its income from that day would go to Israel.

## Bodies

Visual stereotypes are probably one of the most striking issues of historical continuity. Jewish bodies are singled out and marked as different in medieval church art, in early modern caricatures, in contemporary internet memes. The Wiedererkennungswert of Jewish noses, ears, lips, and hair is remarkably stable. However, even here questions arise: how did people in Scandinavia learn these stereotypes? Is anti-Jewish art really only a cultural import from Germany, as has been claimed regarding the particularly revealing wall paintings by Albertus Pictor in Swedish churches? Another highly relevant aspect of Jewish bodies is the gendered nature of resentment. Othering in the postcolonial sense of the term means to define a group of people as fundamentally different from the self and at the same time to deny their inward differences and features. “Jews” are neither really male nor female, even though the other stereotypes (murderer, usurer) are heavily coined by the image of the male perpetrator. Where are the Jewish women? Does Scandinavia know the image of the Jewish seductress, exotic, full of secrets and deceit?

## The PhD project

In addition to the case studies, a PhD student will be recruited in order to work with a particular gap in Scandinavian scholarship: the changes of antisemitic rhetoric and discourse after the Reformation. Two aspects are relevant for this topic: first, the fact that many of the medieval anti-Jewish stereotypes are directly connected to Catholic doctrine – such as transubstantiation, which leads to host desecration accusations, or Marian miracles including Jewish conversions. There is no research at all available regarding the transformation, disappearance or adaptation of these “Catholic” stereotypes in a Nordic Protestant context. Secondly, the significance of anti-Judaism has been thoroughly observed for Martin Luther’s own writings, but not so much for the theological developments and writings in the North. Were there adaptations of Luther’s “Judenschriften” in Denmark and Sweden? If not, why did the “Jew” as the theological Other not become as relevant for Nordic Protestantism as it did in the German lands?

This spotlight on the transformation of popular religious and theological antisemitism in the early modern period will provide a necessary bridge between the medieval and modern basis of the case studies.